



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Report on B. A. Thesis

**"The ground possessed and repossessed":
The Trope of the Feminized Land in Seamus Heaney's *North***
by Adéla Hezinová

This is a meticulously researched and skilfully structured thesis which offers a thorough discussion of a complicated terrain, represented by Seamus Heaney's 1975 collection *North* and its reflection of the stereotypical representations of the national and the feminine in the anglophone and Irish-language poetry tradition. The thesis works with an impressive number of secondary sources which form the basis of its critical narrative.

While such an in-depth grasp of relevant critical literature is commendable and shows to a genuine engagement with the subject matter, the chosen approach has its disadvantages and threatens to be merely derivative. The thesis starts with an outline of diverse historical forms of the image of Ireland as a female figure which serves as a springboard for the analysis of various instances of this trope in Heaney's *North* in the subsequent middle chapter. In the last main chapter of the thesis, various feminist critics and poets are quoted to suggest a possible reading of Heaney's poetry and a possible path for its development. The structure per se works well in relation to the chosen topic, but there are drawbacks that follow from the applied methodology and mark the outcome.

One is that throughout the thesis, more attention is dedicated to the voices of Heaney's critics and female contemporaries than to the poems themselves. This is less of an issue in the opening chapter on the historical context where references to Heaney's work and stances are adeptly incorporated at the end of each subchapter. But more attempt should have been made to keep Heaney's work at the centre of attention in the subsequent two chapters. Close reading is by no means the only legitimate approach in poetry criticism. Yet, if the value of critical writing in general lies in striking a balance between text and context, the present thesis leans strongly in the direction of the latter.

Another drawback is that the thesis seems to be undecided about what it wants to achieve. This may follow, in part, from the lack of a clear thesis statement at the beginning of the work. While at the start the thesis proclaims to offer a new understanding of Heaney's treatment of the said tropes by reading his poems against their historical forms and variations, in its latter part it offers a sum of various critical stances to this aspect of Heaney's poetry. Still, these critical views do not appear to have been gathered in order to take Heaney to task but merely to show that they represent one way of reading his (early) work. As a result, Heaney seems to be vindicated against these critics' accusations, while being strangely absent from the discussion. For example, although Chapter four successfully charts the critical (and poetic) response to "Punishment", as one of the most controversial lyrics in this complex volume, in its defence, not enough space has been given to the text itself. While the lyric is analysed in the previous chapter, as part of the discussion of the political relevance of Heaney's *North*, a new reading of its relevant parts prompted by these critical voices should have been offered here. In several respects it could be said that the thesis is so determined to give a balanced account of the polemic surrounding Heaney's collection that it loses track of itself and the original text in the process.



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Despite these shortcomings, the thesis displays outstanding critical and linguistic skills on the part of the candidate. The text is well-written, with few typos and minor errors in terms of phrasing and the use of the definite and indefinite article, and sufficient care has been given to the formatting of references in the footnotes and bibliography. In terms of its topic and execution, the thesis meets the requirements of a B. A. thesis. I therefore **recommend the thesis for defence and propose that it be graded either excellent or very good**, depending on Ms. Hezinová's performance at the defence and her response to questions, some of which are included below.

In view of the above comments, I propose the following points for discussion during the thesis defence:

1. **Title and thesis statement.** As indicated above, one of the shortcomings of this otherwise very good thesis is the absence of a clearly defined purpose or a thesis statement. Correspondingly, the conclusion fails to make up for this deficiency by summarizing the work's general findings and arguments. Could Ms. Hezinová attempt to clarify the thesis' aim and outcome, perhaps starting with a discussion of the two concepts contained in the quotation from Heaney's "Ocean's Love to Ireland" that has been used in the thesis' title? In what ways are the connotations of "The Ground Possessed and Repossessed" relevant for Heaney's reliance on the eternal feminine and the specific tropes of the feminized land found in the Irish-language tradition? In what ways could these connotations be related to the works and agenda of the feminist poets cited in the thesis?

2. **"Punishment".** Towards the end of Chapter 4 Ms. Hezinová writes that "[t]o decipher the poems requires the reader to get through layers of metaphors, allusions, and complicated syntax". It is precisely this painstaking attention to the poetic text that I lacked in the otherwise very good fourth chapter in which Heaney's "Punishment" is the centre piece. Could Ms. Hezinová give us her own reading of the poem? Does she agree with Coughlan's charges of voyeurism, eroticisation of the feminised land and aestheticisation of murder? A suggestion of Heaney's defence is included on p. 54 where it is argued that the poet's treatment of the feminine in the poem(s) "does not appear to be a subjective conception of gender roles and neither is his approach to women antagonistic." Could this be expanded upon? It would appear that much of the feminist reaction to the poem was triggered by the personal tone of Heaney's address of the dead female body. If Heaney cannot be accused of misogyny, is his treatment of the poem's object to be considered exploitative?

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